

A Study on the Rebuild of Rural Solidarity Based on Social Media Public Space - A Case Study of Village Z in Central Anhui

Peiling Du, Chen Shi*

Anhui University of Finance and Economics, Anhui Province, China

Abstract: As modernisation and urbanisation continue to progress in China, rural areas are facing the dilemma of 'atomisation' and 'dispersion' in parallel with development. The main problems include the decline of traditional village public spaces and the weakening of village ties, which has led to the collapse of local unity. These phenomena are common throughout the country, but are more pronounced in central regions such as Anhui, where people are more mobile. As traditional public spaces tend to shrink, new virtual public spaces have been created by social media such as WeChat groups and "for the village". This paper focuses on the characteristics of the social media public space, in which grassroots villagers, elites from outside the system and members of rural grassroots organisations participate, and the role it plays in rebuilding solidarity in traditional villages.

Keywords: Social media, Public space, Village atomisation, Rural solidarity.

1. Introduction

However, under the impact of modernisation, the former system of governance has become ineffective, and the decay of local solidarity has become a trend, with the common denominator of all rural societies being "atomisation". The common denominator in all rural societies is "atomisation" and "disintegration". The emergence of immoral phenomena, unmanaged public affairs and the primacy of personal monetary interests are all serious threats to village governance, coupled with the progress of urbanisation and a clear trend towards the exodus of village elites, with young people going out to work and the elderly and children as the mainstay of the village in a new predicament. Such problems are particularly pronounced in the central rural areas in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River. While research and analysis of rural society used to focus more on the top-down administrative power of the state and the power of local elites represented by the village gentry and clans, a third force now plays an important role, and the emotional intensity between subjects has quietly changed.

It is urgent to break the "atomisation" of the countryside. After the reform and opening up, the social structure of the countryside has changed. Internet technology has provided the basis for the construction of an endogenous order in the countryside, and the emergence of new virtual spaces has strengthened the ties between members and brought into play the active role of grassroots villagers in rural society. The emergence of WeChat groups and for-village platforms have provided new paths for reconstructing rural solidarity, social media have solidified villagers' social relationships, and the re-integration and reconstruction of rural structures have provided a solid social foundation for rural revitalisation. Focusing on villages in central Anhui province, this paper investigates interpersonal relationships in the public space of social media where multiple subjects participate together, and explores the role of social media platforms in the governance and construction of rural communities, with a view to shedding some light on the plight of the decaying rural vernacular structure in various regions of China.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Public Domain

Western philosophers have maintained a focus on the subject of the public sphere, of which Habermas's theory of the public sphere is a Marx-Weberian type of ideal derived from the history of 18th century France, Britain and Germany. Habermas's study of the public sphere mainly adopts the perspective of democratic theory and emphasises the important role of the political public sphere in achieving democracy, with its three constituent elements: the public, public opinion or public opinion, and the public place or public medium. It is a bourgeois study of the public sphere. As Habermas's theory of the public sphere was somewhat idealistic, its application in the Chinese cultural context was questioned, and towards the end of the twentieth century, the 'public sphere' entered the field of Chinese communication scholars and became an important concept in sociology, political science, philosophy and other disciplines.

Most of the research on publicness by Chinese scholars in the media field has focused on the construction of publicness in the mass media and the path to its realization. Huang Zongzhi puts forward the view that as long as there is a change in the relationship between state and society, there will be a zone of tension between state and society, and the concept of public sphere has theoretical explanatory power for Chinese society. Therefore, there are two different approaches to the study of the rural public sphere and public space: one is to continue the Western perspective of the public sphere in the study of rural governance, while the other focuses on the study of the rural public space as a means of maintaining order in the village. Based on these studies, this paper adopts a more local Chinese conceptual theory of public space, examining and analysing new virtual public spaces such as WeChat groups and for villages, and exploring the important role of new social media public spaces in the reconstruction of rural solidarity.

2.2. Social Integration

In addition to the exploration of public space, the issue of social integration has also received attention. Comte's idea of "social cohesion" and Spencer's theory of the "social organism" were all reflections on the issue of social integration, until Turgot specifically proposed the theory of "social integration". He became the first person to pioneer the theory of "division of labour and integration". Since the reform and opening up of China, the way resources are allocated, the way rights are distributed and the way of production and life in the countryside have undergone great changes. In the process of promoting villagers' autonomy, rural society has faced difficulties in integration and fragmentation, and the establishment of a new integration mechanism for rural society and the improvement of the villagers' autonomy system have become key concerns for domestic scholars. According to Xu Yong (2005), although village committees are autonomous organisations at the grassroots level, in practice they have not only failed to become autonomous organisations to protect the interests of villagers, but have also been absorbed by the top-down hierarchical governance system, playing the role of the "end" of the state administrative system. Luo Miao and Zhu Jun (2012) suggest that the lack of day-to-day supervision provides conditions and space for members of village committees to use the public power to govern the village for private gain and to seize village resources. Many domestic scholars have mentioned the concept of modern governance based on the mechanism of village social integration. Tian Yipeng and others have proposed that the absence of intermediate organisations is the substantive cause of social atomisation and that the most important way to resolve its crisis is to strengthen the construction of social organisations, but the academic community has not conducted in-depth studies on the village integration of villagers with serious decentralisation.

3. Research Methodology

The emergence of the mobile internet has created the conditions for 'online communities' and brought new objects for ethnographic research, and 'online ethnography' was born. The emergence of the mobile internet has created the conditions for "online communities" and brought new objects for ethnographic research. With the development of new technologies, people's daily interactions have gradually changed from traditional face-to-face communication to online communication based on digital technology, entering the era of universal WeChat. The emergence of WeChat groups has brought villagers closer to each other. Villagers' lives have also been enriched by the development of the "For Village" platform, a service platform launched by Tencent that is available to all villages nationwide, enabling villages to achieve leapfrog development through the Internet. By 2021, more than 15,000 villages had registered for the We Village platform, covering dozens of provinces including Sichuan, Hunan and Anhui. Through online observations and in-depth interviews, this paper focuses on the development of WeChat groups and the We Village platform among villages and the ways in which village folk communicate with each other, exploring how people can flexibly use new technologies to create social media public spaces with diverse participation from grassroots villagers, elites outside the system and rural grassroots organisations. The project aims to

reconstruct the solidarity of the countryside and better achieve rural revitalisation.

4. Construction and Characteristics of New Public Space

4.1. The Shrinking of Traditional Public Space

The decay of traditional public space poses a major challenge to social governance at the grassroots level. Public power, public activities and the villagers' subjects are all factors that contribute to the changes in public space. Firstly, there has been a marked change in public power. The "two committees" in the villages were important intermediaries in linking villagers, coordinating conflicts between villagers and ensuring the integrity of village society, especially during the period of the Great People's Commune, when the state delegated power to link villagers together in various public activities to achieve further integration. With the development of the market economy, the state no longer plays a dominant role and gradually withdraws from the governance of the countryside, the governance capacity of the "two committees" and other organisations is weakened, villagers become more individualised and the traditional public space gradually shrinks. Secondly, public activities in the countryside are also decreasing, as they are the main channel for villagers to interact with each other, generally based on daily life matters, and help to exchange information between members. In central Anhui in particular, as villagers work outside the village all year round, their ties with other members of the village are very weak, and even the lively traditional festivals have lost their previous enthusiasm for gathering, so traditional public spaces are gradually shrinking under the influence of these factors, and physical public spaces are no longer the best option for integrating rural society.

4.2. The Rise of Virtual Public Space

The networking of the social era has created a virtual public space as opposed to a physical public space, using internet technology to connect decentralised farmers and build a new type of public platform for communication, management of affairs and access to emotions. The most representative example is the establishment of WeChat groups, where each village has its own WeChat group for posting village affairs, and where different villagers can participate in discussions on village topics at any time, regardless of their location. For example, migrant workers can learn about the village and participate in discussions through the WeChat group after work. This sense of participation has to a certain extent increased the villagers' sense of identification with the village community, and the hollowing out of the village community has been alleviated. In addition, the "For Village" platform is a new type of public space based on mobile internet technology. Compared to WeChat groups, the "For Village" platform is more systematic in its presentation of information, keeping up with current events and allowing villagers to know what is happening in the world without having to leave home. In an era when everyone has a microphone, the "For the Village" platform provides villagers with the opportunity to share their daily life events. In the process, the emotional connection between people grows. The rural economy in the central region of Anhui studied in this paper is relatively slow to develop, with the agricultural economy being the mainstay, and employment conditions being limited. The embedding of WeChat groups and the "For the Village" platform has

brought new changes to the rural social space. The virtual public space created with the support of internet technology is of great significance in linking villagers, achieving cross-temporal and cross-territorial communication, managing public affairs and recreating local solidarity.

4.3. Characteristics of the New Public Space

In the new media age of rapidly developing mobile networks, the emergence of social media has accelerated the speed and breadth of information dissemination. The new public space of social media represented by WeChat can best highlight the characteristics of vernacular communality in rural society. Compared to the old telephone era, the sending and dissemination of information by WeChat is the easiest and most effective for rural members. Not only are they more closely connected to their family members, they have also gained contact with other villagers, and the formation of WeChat groups and the updating of their WeChat circle of friends have firmly connected every member.

4.3.1. Plurality of Participating Subjects

The new media era is characterised by equality and openness. WeChat groups and the "For the Village" platform are set up by villagers, managed by villagers and ultimately serve the villagers themselves. Therefore, any villager, regardless of class, status or age, can join them and become a part of the social media platform. Among the many participating subjects, the more representative ones are the elites outside the system and the grassroots netizen farmers. The content posted by these subjects is modified and edited, focusing on the selection of topics and spreading rural culture while posting information. For example, Anhui Wuhu netizen Dasima, whose catchphrase "Wuhu, take off!" has quickly expanded the city's influence and popularity, and has brought a series of commercial values. The grassroots peasants are the main body of the countryside, and their participation in social media generally takes the form of posting about their daily lives and discussing public events in the countryside. In contrast, the official media is slightly less expressive on rural social media platforms. It mainly publishes hard news and disseminates rural culture for the purpose, so it is not very entertaining and villagers do not pay much attention to the content. Diverse subjects play different roles in disseminating information and integrating rural society, and everyone is concerned about the development of the village and contributes their part in recreating rural unity.

4.3.2. Wide Range of Communication Content

WeChat groups and "for the village" platforms are online organisations that every villager can join, and this type of social media has a low threshold and is quickly gaining popularity in rural areas. The use of dialects is a way of spreading the local culture in everyday communication, and everything about the village community can be shown on the social media platforms. Members of the village community build a social identity as they spread the word to each other. In addition to this, the openness of the online platform also facilitates the spread of rural culture to the outside world, allowing people from all over the country to understand the distinctive culture of the countryside, accelerating cultural interchange, stimulating economic growth and better contributing to rural revitalisation.

4.3.3. Diversification of Communication Forms

The development of new technology has promoted the diversification of social media forms, with the most popular

forms currently being group chats, short videos and public platforms. Voice and emojis have increased the fun of chatting. Even young people who have drifted away are willing to take time out to communicate with village people, and the easy-to-use process is no problem for most villagers. Many are keen to make short videos every day to introduce their parents or to spread the culture of the village. Choosing a communication method that the public is comfortable with will increase the villagers' willingness to communicate and bring the individual and the collective closer together.

5. Virtual Public Space Recreates Rural Solidarity

The atomisation of villages, the reduction of public activities and the decay of physical public spaces have weakened the ties between villagers and brought local unity to the brink of collapse. On the basis of the "rural revitalization" strategy, re-governing the rural social order and reuniting the countryside has become an urgent issue to be resolved. The integration of social media, represented by WeChat groups and the "For the Village" platform, creates a possibility to recreate rural solidarity, break through the traditional rural social communication model, provide a virtual presence of members, connect everyone in cyberspace, strengthen the emotional connection among village people, create public spirit together, maintain rural social order, and regulate The use of the internet to govern village issues explores the mechanisms inherent in the practice.

5.1. Virtual Presence Enhances Social Identity

From face-to-face communication in traditional villages to social media-based communication today, a common space needs to exist and the element of 'presence' is essential. Offline, there are common places such as squares, temples and fairs, which bring people together and are the basis for information exchange. However, as the economy develops and more and more farmers go out to work, these public places are often absent, and the number of people present together decreases, resulting in a loss of collective village memory and a weakening of the sense of identity with the village community. The structure of villages varies from place to place across the country, with villages in the north being mostly linked by small kinship groups and in the south united by large clans, except in the central rural areas where the lack of clan structure makes the degree of atomisation more pronounced compared to villages in the north and south, making central Anhui the focus of this paper. The emergence of virtual public spaces has made up for the lack of physical public spaces in the past, moving from offline to online and no longer being limited by geography and time. The most representative example is the embedding of village WeChat groups, which have brought a new communication space to villagers and reconstructed the collective memory of the village. The virtual co-presence promotes the villagers' sense of identity with the rural community and further integrates the society.

Village z is located in the central part of Anhui province and is characterised by a high degree of mobility, says DWF, the head of the village committee. z is a one-family, self-contained village environment where young people go out to work and only return once a year or even once every few years, while the elderly who remain in the village are not as closely connected as they used to be, and people only approach the

village committee for personal matters and are indifferent to public affairs. With the popularity of smartphones and the increasing availability of social networking software, the village council representatives organised a WeChat group and invited villagers to actively join, ensuring that there was at least one member from each household in the group. At first, the group was mainly for sending announcements, and the villagers were more inclined to be recipients of news. As we became better acquainted, the villagers began to take the initiative in sending messages and discussing village affairs, both big and small, in the group.

5.2. Emotional Empathy Strengthens the Sense of Belonging to the Village

From face-to-face communication in traditional villages to social media-based communication today, a common space needs to exist and the element of 'presence' is essential. Offline, there are common places such as squares, temples and fairs, which bring people together and are the basis for information exchange. However, as the economy develops and more and more farmers go out to work, these public places are often absent, and the number of people present together decreases, resulting in a loss of collective village memory and a weakening of the sense of identity with the village community. The structure of villages varies from place to place across the country, with villages in the north being mostly linked by small kinship groups and in the south united by large clans, except in the central rural areas where the lack of clan structure makes the degree of atomisation more pronounced compared to villages in the north and south, making central Anhui the focus of this paper. The emergence of virtual public spaces has made up for the lack of physical public spaces in the past, moving from offline to online and no longer being limited by geography and time. The most representative example is the embedding of village WeChat groups, which have brought a new communication space to villagers and reconstructed the collective memory of the village. The virtual co-presence promotes the villagers' sense of identity with the rural community and further integrates the society.

Village z is located in the central part of Anhui province and is characterised by a high degree of mobility, says DWF, the head of the village committee. z is a one-family, self-contained village environment where young people go out to work and only return once a year or even once every few years, while the elderly who remain in the village are not as closely connected as they used to be, and people only approach the village committee for personal matters and are indifferent to public affairs. With the popularity of smartphones and the increasing availability of social networking software, the village council representatives organised a WeChat group and invited villagers to actively join, ensuring that there was at least one member from each household in the group. At first, the group was mainly for sending announcements, and the villagers were more inclined to be recipients of news. As we became better acquainted, the villagers began to take the initiative in sending messages and discussing village affairs, both big and small, in the group.

5.3. Public Opinion Fosters A Spirit of Community

Public opinion, also known as public opinion, is the opinion of the majority of citizens on an issue with a common

tendency and is the supreme will of the 'community'. Public opinion plays an important role in the maintenance of social order in the village, and if a member goes against it, he or she will be condemned by others. This is also evident on social media platforms, where villagers who speak out of turn are reminded by village elites who have a certain degree of leadership. The creation of a public opinion platform allows villagers' ideas to meet and collide, gradually fostering a community spirit, shaping a highly unified rural society and recreating local unity.

The establishment of the Z Village WeChat group has helped villagers move from the personal sphere to the public sphere, and the joint participation of multiple subjects can also bring about certain conflicts. In the virtual public space, the individual's need for expression is met, but the collective public interest should come before the individual's. There have been cases of quarrels in the Z Village WeChat group, where villagers have different views, resulting in heated exchanges. When someone says something inappropriate, other villagers see it and stop it in time. "The group should be something positive and energetic, and what cannot be said, we will never allow them to say." So says villager XQY. More villagers will choose to settle their views privately. In this WeChat group, each member links his or her personal interests to those of the village, creating common rules for the village, generating a harmonious atmosphere of public opinion and building a community of interests together.

6. Conclusion

China is a large agricultural country and rural China is dominated by an agricultural economy. While villages are facing the dilemma of atomisation and dispersion, the emergence of social media with the participation of multiple subjects has effectively alleviated the problem of hollowing out of villages. The establishment of virtual public spaces on the Internet has strengthened the ties between villagers, bonded their emotions, gained a sense of social identity in public affairs and formed a sense of community, which is conducive to the reconstruction of the communal nature of the countryside. However, there are still a series of problems with the use of social media in rural societies, such as the limitations of farmers' literacy levels, the popularity of the Internet in rural areas and the ageing of the population. The actual integration and progress of rural society, the creation of an economic and cultural system that belongs to the countryside, the need to pre-judge the pros and cons brought about by new technologies, not to blindly put technology first, and to pay attention to the various factors that affect the re-engineering of rural solidarity in order to achieve the correct transformation of rural society.

Acknowledgment

This work is supported by Research Project of Humanities and Social Sciences in Colleges and Universities of Anhui Province, "Research on the Mechanism of Recreating Local Solidarity in Social Media Public Space", SK2021A0265.

References

- [1] Francis Fukuyama: The Great Divide: Human Nature and the Reconstruction of Social Order . (Beijing: China Social Science Press, China, 2002).
- [2] Habermas: The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. (Shanghai: Xue Lin Publishing House, China, 1999).

- [3] Yan Yunxiang: The transformation of private life: love, family and intimacy in a Chinese village 1949-1999 . (Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Press, China, 2006).
- [4] Du Zanqi: Culture, Power and the State - Rural North China 1900-1942. (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, China, 2018).
- [5] Hong Jiewen, Li Xin. WeChat's "feed-back" communication in rural households: a study of Chen District Village in Shanxi Province. (2019) No. 10, p. 50-74.
- [6] Sha Yao. Rural cultural communication: A realistic path for rural revitalization. (2015) No. 12, p. 101-108.
- [7] Xu Jian, Shang Xiaojuan. An overview of international academic research on social media - an observation based on SSCI highly cited papers. (2015) No. 1, p. 102-110.
- [8] Gui Hua. On the change of social interaction in villages: from gossip. (2010) No. 5, p. 44-48.
- [9] Xia Guofeng. Public Life in Villages: Historical Changes and External Constructions: A Case Study of Xia Village in Southwest Lu. (2010) No. 5, p. 35-44.
- [10] Fang Xiaohong, Niu Yaohong. Online public space and the reproduction of vernacular publicness . (2017) No. 3, p. 30-40.